

Florida church's Christmas musical undaunted by hurricane

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ST. AUGUSTINE, Fla. (BP)—Michael Arnold and his family were among hundreds of St. Augustine residents who fled their homes two months ago as Hurricane Matthew trailed close behind.

While St. Augustine didn't take a direct hit from the hurricane, coastal flooding from its storm surge and high force winds wreaked havoc and destruction for many residents.

When area bridges reopened and Arnold returned home after a three-day mandatory evacuation, he discovered his garage had been flooded and roof needed to be replaced.

The first weekend of December marked another homecoming of sorts for Arnold, as he and more than 200 members of Anastasia Baptist Church debuted their Christmas musical, "The Innkeeper Presents—We Call Him Savior."

'I'm a new man'

For Arnold, who played a minor role in the church's Christmas musical two years ago, the opportunity to play the role of Jacob, a modern-day innkeeper, is symbolic of his real-life discovery of Jesus as his personal Savior.

"I'm a new man," said Arnold, a 46-year-old language arts teacher, regarding his spiritual rebirth in mid-life. "I'm completely different than I

was just two years ago.”

Ray Garner, 68, a financial planner and former church planter/music minister, said that’s “the No. 1 purpose” of the script his wife, Donna, wrote to go along with the 19-song arrangement, which also includes several original lyrical and musical compositions written by members of Anastasia Baptist Church.

The production featured a 40-member adult choir, 27-member orchestra and nearly 30-member children’s ensemble, including six classical ballet dancers.

“Our purpose is to equate the baby in the manger with the God-man who went to the cross and was crucified and resurrected,” Garner said. “He had to die so that we could live.”

Adaptations continue to be made to musical

David Elder, Anastasia Baptist’s worship pastor since 2005, reported since the church’s first production of “The Innkeeper” in 2009, new characters, plot developments and musical compositions were added in 2010 and with each subsequent production every two years.

Some “creative license” was employed again this year to present Jesus’ life, miracles and teachings by juxtaposing the biblical-historical characters with 21st-century contemporaries, as well as adding fictional characters such as Jesus’ childhood friend and neighbor named Isaac, Elder explained.

“We wanted to show what happened then impacts today,” Elder said.

In one scene, for example, one side of the stage shows Jesus and his disciples sharing the Last Supper, while on the other side of the stage, a group of modern-day Christians share communion.

Among other scenes, an older couple recalls Jesus’ first recorded miracle of

turning water to wine at their wedding at Cana. Meanwhile, a modern-day older couple recounts the blessings of putting Christ first throughout their long-lasting marriage.

In another scene, the musical features a monologue of the adulteress who is forgiven by Jesus, as well as a scripted testimonial from a woman in the audience about her own infidelity and Christ's forgiveness and reconciling power in her marriage.

"They need to know in their brokenness that there is a Savior who forgives," Garner said.

Not an 'antiseptic Christmas card version' of the Nativity

Wynne Toler, a 55-year-old draftsman for a steel fabrication company, has portrayed the first-century innkeeper named Yacob since 2009. In a church that averages about 1,500 people for weekly worship, Toler still isn't sure how he landed the role, but he's glad for it.



Mike Arnold (left) and Wynne Toler play innkeepers in Anastasia Baptist Church's Christmas musical, which moved forward despite Hurricane Matthew's onslaught on St. Augustine, Fla., in mid-October. (Photo courtesy of Anastasia Baptist Church)The story of societal skepticism surrounding Jesus' virgin birth and

King Herod's decreed slaughter of Jewish boys age 2 and younger dispels the "antiseptic Christmas card version" so often depicted, Toler said.

"It certainly wasn't peaceful when Christ was born," Toler said. "There was way more going on than we think about in this story."

Having narrated five renditions of "The Innkeeper" over the last seven years, Toler began studying his revised 15-plus-page script in late May. Often recognized by strangers nearly everywhere he goes throughout St. Augustine, Toler said he appreciates the importance of his Christian witness both on- and off-stage.

"It reminds me a lot that I may be the only Jesus that they see," he said. "We preach the entire time we're up there (on stage), but it doesn't sound like preaching."

Too important to be deterred by a hurricane

When Hurricane Matthew left a swath of destruction across the barrier island south of Jacksonville, Toler said, there was never a doubt the church's Christmas musical still would happen.

"The message is way too important," he said. "Sometimes God sends us challenges to find out how really committed we are to him."

Since Hurricane Matthew's onslaught in mid-October, church volunteers have helped about 130 families, more than half of whom aren't members of Anastasia Baptist, with recovery efforts.

For about a week after the storm, dozens of church volunteers provided hundreds of hot meals prepared in the church's kitchen and delivered donations of clothes, canned food and bottled water. Anastasia Baptist, a multiple-campus congregation, sustained minor damage on its island campus when a tree fell on the roof of the church's missions and

evangelism office.

Southern Baptist disaster relief volunteers from around the state as well as Alabama also helped repair flood and wind-ravaged homes.

“There are going to be hurting people for weeks and months to come,” said Neill Robins, coordinator of the church’s storm-recovery outreach efforts. “It’s like a war zone on some parts of the island.”

Meanwhile, about 1,500 people attended the church’s Christmas musical Dec. 2 and 4 in the Christian Life Center on the island campus, even though the outdoor Bethlehem Village had to be scaled back because church volunteers have been focused on storm-recovery outreach efforts.

On stage, Arnold said, the opportunity to pray alongside his mother and 11- and 14-year-old daughters after dropping to his knees while carrying a cross during the musical scene portraying Christ’s crucifixion was life imitating art at its best.

“It’s a pretty realistic depiction of what my family has done for me,” Arnold said. “I’m looking forward to knowing that people will come to Christ because of what we’ve done.”